Sketch

Volume 79, *Number* 2 *Article* 10

The Girl From Galveston

Aaron Kelly*

*

The Girl from Galveston

By: Aaron Kelly

In the backroom of a little music shop just off of 6th and El Lado Sur, he finds it—a pre-war, pre-Carol Ann, pre-cancer Martin D-28. It is a masterpiece of Brazilian rosewood, African mahogany, and Adirondack spruce with abalone shell inlays that refract the light in the room, echoing in concentric rings outward from the sound-hole, and glisten from the position markers that drip down the fretboard like drops of spilled gasoline. Memories step forward, soldiers returning from deployment to their native soil. Upon its head stock, the epitaph "C.F. Martin and Co." is inscribed in elegant scrollwork. He'd owned one exactly like it, decades before, purchased for a hundred dollars the day he'd returned from Vietnam. On soggy nights and early mornings along the roadside or in the thick jungle sauna that drew perspiration from places he'd never known he could sweat, while his brothers gazed at black-and-whites sealed in plastic and dreamt of women, his hands imagined a guitar, its neck, hard and smooth as river stone, and the tense resonating strings beneath his fingers. McLaughlin used to give him hell, during stops as he leaned against the base of a tree or a jeep tire to practice his imagined fingering.

"Hey look, y'all, Skinny Jones is at it again," McLaughlin'd say. "What you gonna play now, Skinny?"

McLaughlin had been from Atlanta.

They don't make them like that anymore, he thinks, standing before the oak and glass case where the relic hangs, and even if they did, it'd be a long time before the craftsmanship caught up to the life this one had seen, before it opened up and really learned to sing.

He'd never concerned himself with "making it," cutting records, or going on the road. There'd always been plenty of places and people who'd pay to hear him play right there in Austin. Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, Albert King—he'd met and played with them all.
He had a good ear—better than many—and long thin fingers to match his long thin arms and long thin legs covered in denim, fingers that could get at songs others couldn't. He was a fair singer, a little raspy, but what he lacked in timbre he made up for in tone and conviction.

Carol Ann used to come to Lefty's with a group of friends less than a block from where he stood now on 6th, where for a time he'd play a couple sets on Thursday nights.

"I like the one about the girl from Galveston," she'd said once, during his break.

He liked the way she said "Galveston," emphasis on the Gal, and the way she smiled when he told her "that song's about you." It'd taken him half the night to work up the nerve.

"Liar," she said. "You couldn't have written that about me. We've only just met tonight."

"Sure it is," he said. "I just didn't know it at the time."

When he finished at midnight, Carol Ann was waiting by the bar.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he asked.

"As long as it's coffee." She never would drink alcohol, but she'd drink coffee anytime—day or night.

That night they departed Lefty's, him carrying his old guitar and her the conversation, and made their way down the block to a little diner where you could sit and watch the night-owls and the drunks shuffle past outside.

"I love to watch people, don't you?" she said, as a waitress brought them mugs full and steaming.

"I suppose, I guess." He never really thought about it. "I don't know."

"I like to imagine where they're going—where they've been. Give them names, make up jobs, relationships, children—just everything, really."

"Okay," he said. "How about that fellow over there, the skinny one with the denim and the hat. What's his story?"

"Well," she said, "let me think..."

She turned in the booth, regarded the man outside for a moment, as if, just by the shape of him, she could see what type of man he'd end up to be. She turned back.

"He's a bit of a loner," she said, pausing, smiling, sipping coffee, continuing on. "I'd say he likes country music: Hank Williams, Bill Monroe that sort of thing. Probably even plays a little guitar, but not as well as you."

"Well, thank you kindly," he said, lifting his mug in salute, and stirring in another dollop of cream and a sprinkle of sugar. "What else do you see, Madame Kulagina?"

"Don't tease," she scolded. "You asked, remember?"

"My apologies," he smiled. "Please, go on."

The man outside was far from view by then and it was just the two of them, him reclining with a long arm stretched across the top of the booth and her sitting straight as a sapling, natural as pine.

"He doesn't have a sweetheart just now," she said, leaning forward, their mugs almost touching, "but he's looking. Might even be he'll find her soon."

"Lucky guy," he said.

"Mhmm," she nodded. "But he hasn't always been. He was in the war," she said, her eyes, bold, almost green, almost blue, holding his. "Lost some people over there, people important to him. He's not the type, though, to sit around and feel sorry. So he just keeps moving on."

"You can see all that?"

"Yup," she said, sipping. "It ain't so hard to see."

The guitar is suspended inside the glass case, locked away, frozen in time. Hard telling when it's last been held and let sing. He makes his way up front to the counter. "I'd like to play that old Martin you got in the back," he says.

"Which one?" asks the clerk, a young guy with hair to the middle of his back and tattoos peeking beneath his sleeves. He looks at the young man. "The old one."

"Oh...Well, we don't usually..."

He lays his thick leather checkbook on the counter. "That make a difference?"

"Yes sir," the clerk says, "I reckon it does," and he grabs a set of keys from beneath the counter.

He'd sold his old Martin after Carol Ann told him about the baby, and he'd fetched a fair price.

"What you going to play now?" Carol Ann asked him, standing in the doorway between the bedroom and the kitchen.

"I don't know—the lottery?"

Of course he'd have liked to have kept it.

The young man leads the way through the shop, past electrics hanging on the walls, cheap foreign made numbers that had no right to call themselves guitars. He unlocks the case, pulls up a stool. The glass door swings open and the smell of ancient tone-wood fills the room.

"This one once belonged to Townes Van Zandt," the clerk says as he hands it over.

"You don't say."

"Sure did."

He bends an ear toward the sound hole, checks the tuning. He can still hear it. "I met him a handful of times. Used to jam at a little place just up the street called Lefty's."

The young man nods, crosses his arms.

The neck feels familiar, and he tickles a couple lines, coaxing his muscle memory from its long dormant sleep. He tries to remember the last time he's played, but can't. He thinks of Carol Ann and their son Beckman over in Lake Charles, now with a wife and children of his own. It'd been a relief to have them the past few days, but they had jobs and lives to get back to.

"Dad, I wish you'd think about coming to stay with us," Beckman'd said. "I hate to think of you here, now... like this."

He'd welcomed the gesture but couldn't bear the thought of being a burden, nor giving up the freedom to come and go. Sometimes he didn't sleep so well and he liked to take a stroll down Musician's Row and listen to the bands from the street who'd play into the morning.

He plays for almost a half an hour before he realizes he's drawn a crowd, everyone quiet, listening. He puts a little flourish on his last tune, a little showmanship from his younger days. As he finishes the clerk starts to applaud. The others follow.

"Thank you," he says. "I didn't know if I still had it in me."

"Well, I'd say you got it, man," the clerk says. "What you gonna play now?

Aaron Kelly graduated from Iowa State in May of 2015 with a degree in English. He enjoys crime stories, detective fiction, westerns, and noir. In his next life, Aaron hopes to attend graduate school, write novels, and learn to fly fish.